

## No provocation, please!



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE speaking as the chief guest at a meeting with the garment owners at Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) offices in Dhaka on July 24, Commerce Minister Hafizuddin Ahmed reportedly asked the garment owners to open fire in case of attacks on their factories in future. He said this in reference to the recent labour unrest in the readymade garment (RMG) sector.

It is really astonishing to see that Hafizuddin Ahmed, holding a cabinet post, made such a provocative statement at a time when normalcy was almost restored in the RMG sector, and the Minimum Wage Board (MWB), formed in late May, was trying hard to arrive at a consensus on minimum wage for RMG workers, when the RMG workers' representatives in the MWB appeared to be flexible in their original demand for Taka 3,000 as minimum basic monthly wage, when State Minister for Labour and Employment Aman Ullah Aman said (July 22) that the government would soon implement the tripartite memorandum of understanding (MOU), signed on June 12, between the owners of the RMG industry, Sramik Karmachari Oikkay Parishad (SKOP), and the government and called upon the owners and workers to co-operate with the government in this regard.

The tripartite MOU of June 12 agreed on 10 conditions which included, inter alia, withdrawal of the cases filed against the workers, no retrenchment of workers, giving appointment letter and identity card to all workers, allowing fair trade unionism, holidays as per existing labour law, and formation of MWB. The meeting, held under the chairmanship of the state minister for labour and employment, prior to signing of the tripartite agreement on June 12, decided to declare and implement the

## BARE FACTS

The RMG workers' representatives in the MWB, on the other hand, are reported to have demanded "just salaries" for the workers taking into consideration that cost of living has increased manifold between 1994, when the minimum wage was fixed at Taka 950 a month, and 2006. It may be mentioned that the Brussels-based International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation has already termed the hourly 6 cent wage of a Bangladeshi RMG worker "truly scandalous" compared to 20 cents in India and Pakistan, 30 cents in Sri Lanka, 40 cents in China and 78 cents in Thailand.

minimum wage structure within three months of the formation of the MWB and implement other terms of the agreement within one month's time.

As a sequel to the tripartite MOU of June 12, another MOU was signed on June 22 between 16 RMG workers' organisations and owners. The MOU, containing 16 points, is basically an elaboration of the 10 points contained in the June 12 MOU. The new MOU further agreed to the implementation of the minimum wage from June, no matter when it is announced by the MWB.

The media has reported that a survey recently conducted by the NGO Karmajibi Nari in 100 factories located in Dhaka and its neighbourhood, reveals that conditions relating to payment of salary and compensation for overtime duty, maternity and other leaves, working hours, sanitary situation, child-care centres are still unsatisfactory in most garment units, and sexual harassment and oppression of workers are still going on in many factories. It has demanded that necessary measures be taken to implement the tripartite agreement. Nari Uddog Kendra, another NGO, formed a human chain at Muktangan in Dhaka city on July 27 demanding immediate implementation of the tripartite agreement of June 12.

Terming the workers' demand for monthly minimum wage "astronomical" the owners' representatives in the MWB are reported to have said that the industry cannot afford to meet such demands. According to them, the RMG owners are also facing some other problems which include, inter alia, payment of an extra \$100,000 on each ship at the Chittagong port, difficulties in getting imports clearance on time and incurring of huge hidden expenditure.

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An independent member in the MWB, in this case a university teacher who has no axe to grind, reportedly suggested Taka 1,800 as the minimum monthly basic wage in a recent meeting of the board against the owners' proposal for Taka 1,230 a month. The MWB is known to have noted the suggestion of the independent member.

Questions have been raised as to why the RMG owners are unwilling to pay reasonable wages to workers when apparels are drawing higher prices in the US and the EU. Quoting the industry source, a Dhaka daily reported that Bangladeshi manufacturers of RMG were getting increased unit prices for their products in recent months, which saw a surge in orders from European and American buyers.

Prices started increasing after imposition of interim quota on some Chinese categories in mid-2005, which forced many buyers to turn to Bangladesh, a traditionally low-cost source of apparels. Quoting market reports provided by the EU and US importers, one factory owner said that unit prices of "made in Bangladesh" garments increased up to 46 per cent during the past four months.

The president of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters

Association, who is also a member of the MWB, has reportedly admitted that high value products are luring more buyers into Bangladesh's apparel market and pushing up unit prices. The recent significant increase in the unit prices of apparels in the US and the EU could not convince our RMG owners to reasonably enhance the wages of workers to enable them to lead a decent life.

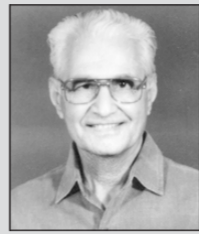
Recent media reports suggest that foreign buyers of RMG products also have called for further measures to address workers' grievances that led to the recent commotion in the RMG sector.

Studies conducted on the RMG sector have attributed the success of the sector to a number of factors which include, among others, government support, contributions from the cheap, disciplined and regimented workers, emergence of a dedicated entrepreneur class and encouraging response from the foreign buyers.

The RMG sector plays a vital role in our national economy by earning more than 70 percent of our foreign exchange and providing jobs to over 2 million workers. Considering the importance of the RMG sector, the MWB has to recommend a minimum basic wage structure that will protect the interests of both, workers and owners, and thereby help expand the industry further. There must not be any provocation from any quarters, to workers or owners, that may contribute to the recurrence of the situation of May last. The government has to ensure that the agreed decisions are implemented on time, and fully.

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## A pointer to what?



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

SEVERAL former lieutenant generals, MPs, ministers and some academics have written a letter to the president with copies to PPP and PML(N) chiefs. What they say is common ground among democrats; the only remarkable thing about it is who has said it. Newspapers have attached significance to it.

These correspondents have demanded "complete and authentic democracy." They have recommended moderation and a spirit of conciliation among the politicians and the real rulers. They also want the army to be depoliticised and the offices of the president and chief of army staff separated.

The idea of an apolitical army is not controversial. These writers have recommended a constructive dialogue. No one can quarrel with this. They also want the elections in 2007 to be transparent and credible. That they will not be unless they are held under a neutral government and the Election Commission is empowered to control the administration.

All this is common ground among liberals. Who has said it is new and significant. Some writers have been close associates of General Pervez Musharraf from the time of his takeover. Many of retired generals can only have the army's higher interests at heart. That their saying these things can create better sense in the army's higher echelons is to be welcomed. Some of these gentlemen are still associated with the government in one capacity or other, despite what Javed Jabbar has claimed. Many of them are personal friends of General Pervez Musharraf. A few are among the architects of Musharraf's political architecture.

Several mean questions arise. Didn't this gentry know the need for transparent polls in 2001 and 2002? Why didn't they give the same advice then; they could not have become all wise in these four years. It would be interesting to find out when precisely did it dawn on them

## PLAIN WORDS

Could it be that the recent trend of events in Pakistan has displeased the Americans more than is apparent? The way Musharraf has cultivated the Chinese and is beginning to lean on their growing investments should be worrying to Americans. Writers of the missive are not known to be anti-Americans. Could it be that the Americans were sending a message to Musharraf through this gentry? Since these worthies had not recommended these good things earlier acquires salience, especially in the context. One is not attributing motives; they could have just woken up now.

that the elections of 2002 were not transparently free and fair and that they would not lead to "complete and authentic" democracy? Many would ask how is it that retired civil servants and generals suddenly become democrats and display good sense. What they did in office is what they now criticise. These are mean questions. But should one skip them?

It is necessary to find out whether this is a major development and into which context it is written. One can briefly mention a list of developments that have recently taken place: President Musharraf has proposed converting Pakistan into an energy corridor for China; he envisages new linkages between China and Pakistan: a railway virtually over the top of the world, oil and gas pipelines and fibre optic links for improving communications. He also envisages linking of Karakoram Highway with Gawadar. China may significantly invest more in Pakistan; it is scheduled to export six nuclear reactors.

Meantime the US has been exhibiting a certain amount of disenchantment with Musharraf and Pakistan for "not doing enough" in fighting the Taliban or helping Afghanistan overcome its difficulties. This is the time when Americans have chosen to disclose that they know that Pakistan is building a big nuclear reactor in Khushab. Pakistan has also been receiving bad press in America and the west in general; gone are the days when Pakistan was enthusiastically lionised for its role in the War on Terror.

This is also the time when India has frozen the composite dialogue with Pakistan. It has adopted a tough tone vis-a-vis this country, talking of "punitive action," including hot pursuit, in fighting terrorism and destroying its infrastructure. Indian media and politicians are accusing Pakistan of some involvement in the 7/11 bombings in Mumbai.

There is also news of informal contacts between Benazir Bhutto and President Musharraf, as also

between the latter and Nawaz Sharif. The buzzword in Islamabad appears to be that a certain amount of success has been achieved in the indirect talks between PPP chief and the army chief. This has prompted BB to welcome this letter of retired generals. She has demanded that instead of a neutral government comprising technocrats, it should be a national government that organises the upcoming polls. She has also welcomed the talks idea and seems to be positive, and inclined toward taking a moderate line of preferring conciliation to confrontation.

Not to be ignored is the fact that ARD and MMA are beginning to cooperate in an agitation to be. Many parties have signed a Charter of Democracy indicating convergence between PML(N) and PPP. Whether or not this was a tactic, it is a major development. Should the three major opposition mainstream parties, viz. PPP, PML(N) and the MMA join hands and start an agitation, they can create much turbulence.

It is true that Pakistan is already riven by many divisions. There are polarisations along ideological, political and ethnic as well as sectarian lines; it is being criticised by international financial institutions for bad governance. A conceivably raging and tearing agitation can make the government vulnerable.

The question is whether the letter is meant to ensure that the army remains an apolitical asset of Pakistan which the US has always cultivated; what attracted America was the army that can be useful to it. The army is now being extensively used within the country and is being criticised for its role. That can reduce the army's attractiveness.

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Alternatively, it can be seen as an effort to facilitate a dialogue with opposition parties. This letter seems to be preparing the ground for Musharraf to graciously permit the two main opposition leaders to participate in the January 2008 elections. They emphasise the upcoming polls' credibility. May be the government may have finally realised the need for flexibility to accept Benazir Bhutto to participate in the election.

Insofar as the policies of Benazir and Nawaz are concerned, they have not been different from Musharraf's. Neither of these two politicians is anti-American, neither is known to favour lines of action unwelcome to Washington. Their economics is the same that Shaukat Aziz is promoting. Either being associated with the government, possibly in a national government, would only strengthen Musharraf. He or she would be seen to have agreed to serve General Musharraf. Could the recommended reconciliation be a ploy inspired from on high?

Insofar as India policy is concerned, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir have followed much the same policy that Musharraf is pursuing. Doubtless there was the Kargil episode that created bad blood between Nawaz and Musharraf. Little need be said now except that both Nawaz and Musharraf favour the same India policy. Insofar as Benazir is concerned, she too wants friendship with India, including PML publicists. Why can't all three adopt a policy of friendly cooperation with India?

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## Somalia's harsh rules of order

ROD NORDLAND

IT might seem that Somalis were put on this earth to suffer. For the past 15 years, they've had civil war. For most of the past decade, there's been drought. The few times the drought has eased, there've been floods. The state has collapsed so totally there are no public services whatever. Potholed roads have been replaced by tracks in the bush. Water is sold by private entrepreneurs. Hospitals treat patients to bring their own mattresses, even their own beds, and enough money to fuel the generator if, for instance, they need the use of an X-ray machine.

Early this year the drought was even worse than usual, and the meager crops failed. Aid agencies poured in relief -- now going to 2.1 million out of 10 million Somalis -- but only half the budgeted amount made it. Much was lost to thieving warlords; pirates even seized two World Food Program vessels and shot up a third. A humanitarian disaster was averted this spring, thanks to indifferent rains and determined relief work, but only just -- UN officials warned that renewed warfare could spell doom. Then in July, of course, there was renewed warfare.

This time, however, the fighting was brief, and by Somali standards relatively bloodless (400 died). Afterward, for the first time, the warlords who had been running amok were chased from Mogadishu. A visitor last week was able to spend five days in the capital without hearing a single gunshot or negotiating a militia roadblock (there used to be 10 just on the road to the airport). The Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a popular movement built around traditional Islamic Sharia courts and financed by fed-up businessmen, collected the militiamen's guns and roused up their "technicals" -- jeeps with gun mounts in the back. "In 15 years, no one was able to do what they did in 15 days," says UN official Saverio Bertolino.

Instead of warlords now, though, Somalis have what many are calling an African version of the Taliban, bent not only on imposing a harsh, Wahabi-style Islam on the country but allegedly also providing a safe haven for international terrorists. Movies, music and mixed wedding ceremonies have been banned; open-air video parlors showing World Cup matches were shut down. Recently

the group appointed a majlis al-shura (consultative council) to be its supreme spiritual and policy-setting body and appointed as its leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who is on the US terrorist watch list for his connection to a Somali militant group, Al-Itihad al-Islamiya.

In an interview with Newsweek, Aweys praised Osama bin Laden, likening him to Nelson Mandela, and tried to justify al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center. "Since Osama was fighting against his enemy, he could use any tactic he had available to him," Aweys said. And he confirmed he had been a leader of Al-Itihad, though he added: "I don't know anything that Al-Itihad did to America."

US officials have accused the ICU of harboring three terrorists accused in the bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. The Islamists reject the charge, but there are plenty of kindred spirits in the Islamists' ranks. Among them is Aden Hashi Ayro, an Afghan-trained Somali who US officials say was behind the assassinations of four aid workers in Somaliland and the execution of Abdul Qadir Yahya, an internationally known civic leader,

last year.

Aweys describes Ayro as "a good man" who's never been convicted of a crime. Yet some of his acknowledged exploits have been dubious enough. Last year Ayro and his followers disinterred all the bodies from the colonial-era Italian cemetery in Mogadishu and dumped them in the trash. In their place they set up an Islamic militia training camp. An ICU-made propaganda video titled "Punishment of the Converts," obtained by Newsweek from an Islamic militiaman in Mogadishu, shows the Somali Islamists training in the cemetery, interspersed with speeches from several of the ICU's leading military figures, including a partially masked man who appears to be Ayro, according to Somalis who know him. The dialogue is Pan-Islamic and pro-terrorist; the voice-over features Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. "Every Muslim who is victimized in the world, we are calling him to come here," says one masked Somali fighter. "It will be a safe haven for him." The Islamic militias' internal newspaper, Al Jihad, puts it more bluntly: "Terrorism is Compulsory," reads a July 3 headline. "Terrorism, extremism and

fundamentalism are part of Islam and good."

In February, the warlords in Mogadishu -- having lost not only the capital but most of the rest of south and central Somalia to the Islamists -- banded together in what they dubbed an "anti-terrorist alliance," which was rich, considering their past attacks on first US and later UN peacekeepers, whom they finally drove out of the country in 1995. They were worried about the growing influence of the Courts Union. The Transitional Federal Government, an internationally recognized body that rules only the bush town of Baidoa, took in some of the defeated warlords. The transitional government cried foul when the ICU militia advanced to a town 60 kilometers from Baidoa, establishing a Sharia court there and then returning to the capital. Neighboring Ethiopia was so alarmed that it threatened to invade if the Islamists entered Baidoa, and even sent an advance party of 120 troops to the city, according to UN witnesses. Somalia's long run of suffering may still be far from over.

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## IN MEMORIAM

### My young friend and confidante

FAYZA HAQ

WHEN I first saw Novera, I had no notion that she would become fast friends. Yet we were. As we worked together in the culture page, and I got to know her through her courtship, marriage and the experiences that we shared with our assignments and our work at the office, I realised that she was a wonderful person, with a warm and generous personality. Even when she bore a petulant face, which was seldom, her eyes always lit up with joie de vivre. With her shining eyes and curly top, she won the hearts of all whom she encountered in the office.

Novera came only once or twice to my house but her presence charmed everyone at home. We went out together twice or thrice but I'll never forget the moments. We went to the costume jeweller's shop and to an exhibition for costume jewelry. Novu, as I called her, had a fascination for costume jewelry, and we often discussed the topic. We gazed at the ads on the computer and shared our likes and dislikes. We talked about clothes, friendship, dating, families, books, music, and what you will. She was years youn-

ger than me but I never felt it. Once I was in a tight position when defending one of my writings, and it was Novera who came to my rescue. I will always be grateful to her for that. Sometimes when going home, she gave me lifts and paid the fare herself.

I felt she could read my mind when looking at my face. That can only happen when the other person is truly a good friend. When I was full of anger and desperation she would say something utterly funny and make me laugh and forget my cross mood. As we shared our lunch-time at the office cafeteria, with others in the group, she was the life of the gossip and banter sessions. I have never met anyone so full of life. She had many friends both in and outside the office. Sometimes, just for fun, we said foul things about our work, but now, when I look back, all that was pure jollity. Intelligent, hard working, and full of daring, she would surely have made one of the best female reporters in our country.

In the moments we could catch being together, despite the pressure of work, I got to know about her family, college and university friends, and her many likes and



dislikes. Apart from writing, she could draw and sing well. She read copiously whenever she had the time. When she got married, she made herself useful in the kitchen by experimenting with intricate dishes. She sewed her own clothes, too. Even though the fitting of these "shalwar-kameezes" may not have been all that experimental. I found her a fascinating friend and colleague. I will always treasure the moments with her, with her sparkling eyes and ready smile.

## Karnaphuli Bridge III

KAZI S M KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

KARNAPHULI is not yet a woe to Chittagong as the Nile was to Egypt. But, if things continue the way they are going on now, those days are, perhaps, not far off when the adage might fit. Reportedly, thousands of crores of takas have gone here and there during the nearly five years of the coalition government. But it is really hard to believe that the government just could not, or did not -- as many complain -- manage only Taka 800 crore to construct a suspension bridge on the Karnaphuli river.

Painfully, though, two previous regimes, BNP (1991-1996) and AL (1996-2001), did not even entertain the plea for a third bridge either. Now, with only less than three months to go, however, the govern-

ment is showing exceptional alacrity to get the construction work of a pillar-based bridge -- that, too, allegedly on a faulty design -- going as quickly as possible.

From its very late and abrupt desperation it seems clear that BNP will be mightily happy if it can get the work started at least on the day it hands over power to the caretaker government. Is there really no political expediency in this? Or is it, as alleged by government ministers, Chittagong City Corporation Mayor, ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, who is trying to make it a political issue?

I reckon the informed people including, of course, the inhabitants of greater Chittagong, are unlikely to give countenance to the observation of the ministers. While the government can start a development work at any time, in good faith, this particular timing -- with alleged trade-off with devastating fallouts --

provides ample ammunition to the skeptics.

There would be no scope for criticism of the pillar-based bridge had the experts of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and some research bodies, not warned of the dangers of a third pillar-based bridge on the Karnaphuli river.

There are already two pillar-based bridges on the Kanaphuli river. The first one, Kalurghat Bridge (built in 1931) still serves with frequent closures due to essential repair works. The second one, Shah Amanat Bridge (built in 1989) got cracked within a few years of its construction and suffered a lethal jolt during the 1991 cyclone. Its workability has been nominal ever since.

Because of the two pillar-based bridges there is already the problem

of loss of navigability due to sedimentation in the Karnaphuli river. The experts opine that the third pillar-based bridge, and resultant excessive siltation, would spell disaster for the river thus affecting the Chittagong port channel.

Consequently, the Chittagong port would lose its usability thereby severely affecting the economy of this region, from which Bangladesh's economy would not remain immune. Besides, jetties of the Bangladesh Navy, BIWTC, BIWTA, Marine Academy, Oil installations, TSP, SILO and other public and private institutions would also be in danger of becoming inoperative. The ecological balance of the region may also be in danger.

Powerful ministers of the government and the contractor of that proposed bridge, "China Major Bridge Company" and its consultant firm are, however, vociferous

enough to establish their point. After all, our ministers, and contractors, are a lot more knowledgeable than the experts of BUET. They tend to stress the point that there will be no siltation as it will be a suspension-type bridge. But, a full suspension bridge is just not affordable as it would require nearly Taka 200 crore more which has been claimed to be saved by our cost-effective(!) ministers.

Admittedly, corruption of mammoth amounts, in various sectors of the government, is now being openly acknowledged, even by the ministers. Thus, the self-proclaimed credit of saving money by the ministers is, I think, a real joke! Yes, Taka 200 crore is indeed a big, and unmanageable, amount for the government. Reportedly, Taka 34,550 crore got drained out from the government exchequer over the last six years. Taka 2,000 crore has

been misappropriated in DESA over the last few years. However, compared to the real magnitude of corruption in our country, the information provided above should be regarded as only the tip of the iceberg.

Meanwhile, Taka 17,000 crore was earmarked as block allocation in the last budget. Many economists have remarked that the amount will be used mainly for election purposes. But the government was not kind enough to get only Taka 200 crore even from that lavish source. It is to be mentioned here that the Chittagong City Corporation mayor made a proposal for constructing a suspension bridge with no finance from the government. He even proposed begging from door to door to collect the required amount.

Surely, accepting the mayor's proposal would have been humiliating for the government, but the

government could have rebutted the city mayor's challenge by constructing a suspension bridge. It, however, chose the other way round. The government could even have sought donations from the inhabitants of Chittagong if it was not ready to allocate the actual, or extra, amount. In passing, the people of the country deposited money for the Jamuna Bridge for 15 years through paying surcharge.

There is also the grave allegation that the government spurned offers from Denmark and Japan for a suspension bridge for reasons best known to itself. In fact, there is no room for being regional in this age of globalisation. Chittagong has already become sort of a cosmopolitan zone, with permanent settlement of many people from other districts, which is essential, and welcome, for mutual enrichment and diversity.

Admittedly, development of a country entails development of all parts of it. A sound and eco-friendly Karnaphuli bridge is not only a long-standing demand of the people of the region, but also a national concern, as Chittagong port, and the nation's economy, are also involved with it.

Thus, the government will be well-advised to construct such a bridge that serves the purpose and creates no unintended side-effects. Short-time goal at the cost of the sustainability of the region and country's economy might well prove counter-productive.

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